

Luth. Ch. - Mo. Synod

*A Report
to All Members
of the Synod
by the Praesidium
of the Synod
and
Concordia Seminary
St. Louis, Mo.*



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DEAR FRIEND AND CO-WORKER

Through President John W. Behnken's letter of August 1960 and through the Special Report in the *Lutheran Witness* of April 1961 it became general knowledge that Dr. Martin Scharlemann, professor of theology at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri, delivered, upon invitation, a number of essays to his faculty and to pastoral conferences in various parts of the Synod. As a result of these presentations criticism has been directed against Dr. Scharlemann. Because of the criticism the president and the academic dean of the seminary, the Board of Control of the seminary, and the President and the Vice-Presidents of the Synod have had numerous meetings with Dr. Scharlemann during the past months, as individuals and as combined groups. Through such meetings the parties charged by the Synod to supervise the doctrine of the faculty attempted, with the help of God, to safeguard the welfare of the church, especially that of the seminary and its students. At the same time they sought to show an evangelical concern and brotherly love for Dr. Scharlemann. (Cf. Synodical Constitution, Article III, 7 and 8)

These discussions culminated in the calling of a meeting for September 26 and 27, 1961. Present were the President and the Vice-Presidents of the Synod, the pastoral members of the Board of Control, the president and the academic dean of the seminary, and Dr. Scharlemann. In preparation for the meeting a number of questions were previously submitted to Dr. Scharlemann, which he was asked to answer in writing. The questions and answers served as a basis for a comprehensive discussion, in which the doctrinal concerns (inerrancy, the doctrine of the Scriptures, and others) received frank but evangelical consideration. For the sake of clarity and complete mutual understanding Dr. Scharlemann was given the opportunity, in response to the questions, to expand on his written statements.

As an outgrowth of this and the previous meetings, and as a result of the discussions at conferences and from his correspondence, Dr. Scharlemann reiterated clearly and unequivocally that he had retracted his suggestion that the term "inerrancy" when applied to Scripture ought no longer be used. Dr. Scharlemann also recognized that the manner in which he presented his essays left much to be desired. There were sentences and paragraphs in these papers that were misleading. For this reason Dr. Scharlemann has retracted the sentence "Scriptures are not in themselves a revelation" from his essay "The Bible as Record, Witness, and Medium." Dr. Scharlemann has furthermore withdrawn the sentence "Most certainly David believed that other gods ruled outside the confines of Israel" as found in his article "God Is One," published in the *Lutheran Quarterly*, August 1959, Vol. XI, pp. 230—36.

Dr. Scharlemann admitted in the discussions that one of the complicating features of the whole situation had been a lack of patience and tact on his part in the presentation of materials.

When sharp criticism was directed against Dr. Scharlemann's essay, the Board of Control of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, asked these critics to present clear evidence of doctrinal error on the part of Dr. Scharlemann. Critics were also invited to come before the Board of Control with such evidence and to discuss the matter in the presence of Dr. Scharlemann. These invitations were declined. The President and the Vice-Presidents of the Synod made similar efforts. At this writing there is hope for a meeting.

The officials of the Synod and the seminary, together with Dr. Scharlemann, recognize that it is the task of the faculties of our seminaries, as it is the task of every pastor and teacher of our church, constantly to restudy the church's doctrinal formulations within the limitations of the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions. It is imperative that the church, confronted with new opportunities and new situations, and faced with new attacks on the divine revelation, restate, redefine, and amplify her formulations. The church depends upon the guidance of the Holy Spirit in this all-important and solemn obligation.

The following questions were addressed to Dr. Scharlemann, and these are his answers:

1. Q. *What is your position in regard to the doctrinal position of The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod?*

A. The Synod's position is correct. That is why I am a member of this church. I accept the Scriptures of the Old Testament and the New Testament as the written Word of God and the only rule and norm of faith and of practice, and all the Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church contained in the *Book of Concord* as a true and unadulterated statement and exposition of the Word of God. According to my ordination vow, which I repeated when I was installed as professor of theology at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, I am solemnly pledged to the Scriptures as "the inspired Word of God and the only infallible rule of faith and practice" (*The Lutheran Agenda*, p. 127). Furthermore, I believe and accept the doctrinal content of the *Brief Statement*. As I stated in the *Lutheran Witness* (April 4, 1961, p. 165): "I am fully aware that all of us teachers at synodical institutions have a special responsibility to reflect the attitude and approach toward Scripture that is represented by this document."

Nevertheless we must recognize "that theology, by its very nature, leaves many questions unanswered, and that as a result there are areas of expressions and opinion, including some matters of introduction and interpretation, which have not been unequivocally resolved by the Sacred Scriptures and in which Lutheran theologians may differ without on that account being in *doctrinal disagreement*." (Mutual Responsibility of Teachers and Students with Respect to Theological Discussions at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, C, 1, b.)

2. Q. *Is there any one of the doctrines of our church with which you disagree?*

A. No.

3. Q. *What do you mean by statements you have made that the Synod must be brought up to date?*

A. I do not mean that the doctrine of our church is out of date. Rather these statements were made to emphasize the responsibility of studying theology as an ongoing task of the church. New problems demand new applications of old truths. The truths of Scripture must be applied to present-day problems.

4. Q. *What do you mean by a statement made in a meeting between the faculty and the President and the Vice-Presidents of the Synod that our church must be made ready (conditioned) for a change?*

A. As far as I could determine, few were aware of the fact that certain problems existed in areas such as the Word, the church, revelation, inspiration, Holy Baptism, to mention several. These new problems were created largely by the impact of modern theology and science. I did not mean that any doctrine needs to be changed.

5. Q. *What is your evaluation of Karl Barth's Neo-orthodoxy? Bultmann's demythologizing? Emil Brunner's theology? Tillich's teachings?*

A. By way of preface to my answers to these questions, let me say that it is my practice to attempt to find out what an individual theologian is really trying to say. I want to be very sure that I understand him and that I am fair to him before making any judgments.

As far as Karl Barth is concerned, his theology — as far as I have read it — suffers from the following major defects:

- a. That the Bible is the Word of God only when it is that to me (subjectivism).
- b. That there is no revelation of any kind outside of Jesus Christ (no revelation in nature).

I have always categorically rejected Bultmann's demythologizing. I have insisted that the proper way to interpret the Bible is to take the reader back to the Biblical point of view rather than attempting to bring the Bible up to date by stripping it of what Bultmann calls its mythological elements.

The works of Emil Brunner that I have read deal mostly with the prolegomena of theology proper. I consider his *Reason and Revelation* a major contribution to epistemology, especially to the question of the nature of religious knowledge. At the same time, Brunner does not

respect the authority of the written Word as we of the Missouri Synod do. At this point I criticize him severely as being a threat to the authoritative place of Scripture in the church.

In the case of Tillich, I have taken him at his word that he is a philosopher of religion rather than a theologian. For that reason I have read little more of him than his treatment of epistemology. I have repeatedly taken exception to his notion that having an "idea of Christ" is enough.

6. Q. *What do you say of these theologians, especially as their teachings relate to the infallibility and inerrancy of Holy Writ?*

A. They do not discuss these matters from our frame of reference. Whatever they have said that detracts from the authority of Scripture, I reject out of hand.

7. Q. *How do you understand the Australian statement on inerrancy?* This statement reads:

"This inerrancy of the Holy Scriptures cannot be seen with human eyes, nor can it be proved to human reason; it is an article of faith, a belief in something that is hidden and not obvious. We believe that the Scriptures are the Word of God and therefore inerrant. The term 'inerrancy' has no reference to the variant readings found in the textual sources because of copyists' errors or deliberate alterations; neither does it imply an absolute verbal accuracy in quotations and in parallel accounts, such absolute conformity evidently not having been part of God's design. We believe that the holy writers, whom God used, retained the distinctive features of their personalities (language and terminology, literary methods, conditions of life, knowledge of nature and history as apart from direct revelation and prophecy). God made use of them in such a manner that even that which human reason might call a deficiency in Holy Scriptures must serve the divine purpose."

A. I understand the Australian statement to be a very creative contribution to a proper understanding of Scripture. Keeping in mind the historical and natural knowledge among the characteristics of each Biblical author is a most satisfactory solution to a very difficult problem. I believe that Dr. Herman Sasse of Australia has pointed this up very well when he wrote in a recent letter to President Behnken (September 17, 1961):

"Only if we humbly bow before the mystery of the Word of God which is hidden under a truly human appearance and which seems to contradict that which we would expect the Word of God to be, we shall be able to investigate the human form. It was a great mistake

of what Luther would call a *theologia gloriae* of the Word to expect that the Bible must correspond to our human ideals of a perfect book. We have to recognize that it pleased God to speak of nature in the Bible in such a way that people of all ages, wise and unwise, could understand what He wanted us to know. We have also to recognize that He wanted the historical narratives to be written in exactly the same way in which the people of the ancient Orient wrote history. It is not a lie if somewhere figures are given, concerning the size of the people or the like, which, as all [EDITORIAL NOTE: We prefer *many* instead of *all*] such figures in ancient historiography, are not meant to satisfy a modern statistician but to serve as illustration of a multitude. It was a great mistake of the theologians of the 17th century that they read their ideals of a book into the Bible, defending the holy writers even against the suspicion that their Greek was not flawless. The same mistake was made in the later centuries when professors, trained, as they believed, in the methods of true historical research, dissected the Holy Scriptures and accepted only that which they liked. We have learned, meanwhile, or we should have learned, that the books of the Bible must be understood by the measures they themselves have set. What did the author mean? What was the intention he had when saying this or that, when making use of tradition in this or that way?"

8. Q. *What is your position on inerrancy?*

A. My position is that of the Australian statement, as I have indicated on several occasions. To be properly used of the Scriptures, the term "inerrancy" must be seen in the light of the Biblical understanding of truth and error. This is an application of the Reformation principle that the Scriptures are their own interpreter.

9. Q. *Do you believe and teach that the Bible may contain errors or mistakes?*

A. I have tried to avoid the use of "error" and "mistake," because these words suggest the kind of imperfections and human fallibility that is not found in the Scriptures. I have said that Biblical authors wrote from where they were, as people of their day. As a result, there are in the Scriptures what one might call a number of discrepancies whenever one attempts to use such parts of the Scriptures in a sense and for a purpose not intended by God, e. g., as Dr. Sasse put it, "to satisfy a modern statistician." One could multiply this by saying, "to satisfy the precision of a modern scientist or a historian or an archaeologist." Yet all parts of the Scripture, even the seeming discrepancies, are true and are there because God wants them there as part of His own saving intent toward us.

10. Q. *What did you mean by your “change of mind and heart” as stated in Dr. Behnken’s letter of August 1960?*

A. Once I advocated the elimination of the term “inerrancy.” Now I argue for its retention to underline the utter reliability of the written Word. This is what I meant; and I certainly tried to make this very clear at the time. I have never denied what the church meant by the doctrine of inerrancy. As I stated once before (*Lutheran Witness*, April 4, 1961, p. 164), my concern with the term inerrancy was in no way intended to be either an attack on the doctrine of inerrancy or an assault against the Scripture itself. Whatever references were made to the Scriptures in this connection were selected to support the view that the use of this term (inerrancy) led some people to misunderstanding. I sincerely regret that I, at one time or another, gave a different impression.

11. Q. *Why do you emphasize the “mighty acts of God” through which God revealed Himself?*

A. I have consistently spoken of the “mighty acts of God” because this is the Scriptural emphasis; cf. Acts 2:11: “We do hear them speak in our tongues the wonderful works of God” (Greek: “great things God has done”). 1 Peter 2:9: “But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should show forth the praises [Greek: ‘wonderful deeds’] of Him who hath called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.”

12. Q. *Is not the Bible itself a revelation of God?*

A. The Scriptures do not speak of themselves as a revelation. Two rather different words, for example, are used in Romans 16:25, 26 to speak, on the one hand, of the “revelation” in Jesus Christ and the apostolic proclamation, and, on the other, the “making known” by prophetic writings.

Romans 16:25, 26: “Now to Him that is of power to establish you according to my Gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery, which was kept secret since the world began, but now is made manifest, and by the Scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the everlasting God, made known to all nations for the obedience of faith. . . .”

However, I do not mean to deny what we have taught, that the Bible is God’s revelation to man. (Cf. *Lutheran Cyclopedie*, “Revelation,” p. 907)

13. Q. *Is Holy Writ merely a record, medium, and witness of revelation?*

A. As I see it, the word “merely” in the question is out of place. I have no objection to speaking of the Scriptures as revelation. In fact, our dogmaticians do just that. My purpose was to inquire whether the Scriptures use this concept about themselves. My suggestion that the Bible is a record, witness, and medium of revelation really intended to say more, rather than less. We should not stop with calling Scripture a revelation, but in addition take it on its own terms as a record and medium of the mighty acts of God and a witness to them. (Cf. *Lutheran Cyclopedie*, “Revelation,” p. 907)

From our discussion it has been made clear that my statement “Scriptures are not in themselves a revelation,” in my essay “The Bible as Record, Witness, and Medium” has been a source of difficulty and concern. I, therefore, withdraw the statement. Without considerable oral explanation it certainly lends itself to misunderstanding. In this connection it may be useful to say that both essays, “The Bible as Record, Witness, and Medium” and “Revelation and Inspiration” have been superseded by a more carefully worded article in the April 1961 issue of *Concordia Theological Monthly* called “God’s Acts as Revelation.”

14. Q. *In what sense could you, as a theological professor, claim that your papers read before large pastoral conferences were “exploratory”?*

A. They deal with matters on which our church has said very little and to which it was not seriously addressing itself.

15. Q. *Is that the place to explore any teachings about which you are not certain?*

A. Yes; in fact, I was invited by the program committee of the pastoral conference of the Atlantic District to do just this. This is one of the purposes of pastoral conferences — to discuss God’s Word especially as it is relevant to our time.

I discussed the subject of revelation and inspiration on the basis of notes, fully prepared to modify whatever might appear unbiblical. The presentation seemed to be so well received that I felt it could be used in other places. And so I did, always on invitation from responsible groups.

My essay “The Inerrancy of Scripture” was intended solely for faculty discussion and was a part of a larger series of studies conducted by our faculty. It, too, was originally presented on the basis of notes.

It was written out by faculty request to enable faculty members to discuss the presentation more thoroughly at a subsequent meeting.

Although two of my essays were prepared before the San Francisco convention, I believe that my procedure in reading such exploratory essays was in harmony with Committee 3, Resolution 9, Section C, of the San Francisco convention. (*Proceedings*, p. 191)

16. Q. *Did you not defend your essays?*

A. Yes, of course. This is the only way one can have a discussion. However, this does not mean that my exploratory essays set forth my final position.

17. Q. *What do you mean by your claim that you modified your essays?*

A. The changes I made were in matters of methodology, language, and in the instance of the use or nonuse of the term "inerrancy." Whatever modifications have appeared in the superseding paper, "God's Acts as Revelation," are matters of clarification, emphasis, fuller context, and style.

18. Q. *What did you mean when before your brethren on the faculty you planned to set forth the paradox that the Book of Truth contains errors?*

A. A paradox is a seeming contradiction. The paper "The Inerrancy of Scripture," as stated above, was written for discussion within the faculty only. It was to show that this paradox can be properly resolved only when it is viewed in the light of the Scriptures themselves, their language, their literary forms, and their concept of truth. In this context I used the term "error" to put the paradox in its baldest terms and in the light of contemporary discussions of the word "inerrancy."

19. Q. *What do you believe and teach concerning the Bible record of creation? Was it a fiat creation? Is there any room for theistic evolution?*

A. My view is that Genesis 1 and 2 describe the way in which the world was created. (Hebrews 11:3: "Through faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that things which are seen were not made of things which do appear.") Yes, there was a *fiat* creation then as there is also when faith is created (cf. 2 Cor. 4:6: "For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ"). In my own thinking there is no room for theistic evolution.

20. Q. *What do you believe and teach concerning the Bible record of the creation of Adam and Eve? Were they truly the first parents of the human race?*

A. I have insisted in my papers that Adam and Eve were historical persons and so the first parents of the human race.

21. Q. *What do you believe and teach concerning the Bible record of the account of the Fall?*

A. I have always spoken of the Fall as a real occurrence, as being neither a parable nor a myth. I have also called attention to the fact that Genesis 3 does not say in express words that the serpent was Satan. This statement can be understood fully only from other parts of the Scripture, where the serpent or the dragon is a symbol of Satan (Rev. 12:9: "And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the devil and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world: he was cast out into the earth, and his angels were cast out with him").

22. Q. *What do you believe and teach concerning the Bible record of the first and subsequent Messianic prophecies?*

A. I have always understood and thought of these prophecies as being genuine promises of a coming Messiah. But I have also stressed the fact that the Old Testament consists of much more by way of promise than specific Messianic prophecies.

CONCLUSION

On the basis of our comprehensive and thorough discussion we, who carried on these conversations with Professor Scharlemann, find that he is in full agreement with the teaching of the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions. He takes a proper position with regard to the formulations of the doctrinal position of the Synod, specifically the *Brief Statement*, and has proceeded in accordance with recommended synodical practice. (See Resolution 9, Committee 3, San Francisco convention)

All of us whose names appear below concurred wholeheartedly in this entire report: The President and the Vice-Presidents of the Synod, the president and the academic dean of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, the clergy members of the Board of Control of the seminary, and Prof. Martin Scharlemann. It is the report of all the twelve men assigned to this work. All of us recognize the seriousness of the responsibility with which we are charged.

We are grateful to the Holy Spirit, whose guidance we implored, that this report is unanimous. No compromise has been involved in reaching agreement.

We thank our heavenly Father that He has blessed these meetings, and we beseech Him to pour upon our Synod and all Christians everywhere the grace of unity that we may worthily serve Him.

(Signed)

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St. Louis, Missouri

November 29, 1961

P. S. The above report was presented to the meeting of the College of Presidents and the faculties of both of our theological seminaries, Wednesday, November 29, 1961. At the conclusion of a thorough discussion the group of 115 men unanimously resolved: "We thank all those involved for this presentation and express our gratification for the progress made."

J. W. BEHNKEN